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Madeline Viljoen

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AFRICANA



African-American Artists
of Philadelphia

African Tribal Art

The African-American Seen

LA SALLE UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
February — March 2005

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS IN PHILADELPHIA

1. Moe Brooker (b. 1940 —)

Might Could, 2000

Oil pastel on paper

Signed, L.L.: Brooker TTGG (To The Glory of God) 00

Purchased with funds provided by Michael Duffy, Dr. Helen North, Dr. Dennis O'Brien and the Morrow-Farrell Family (in memory of Theodore Eggleston Morrow).

This most recent acquisition for the La Salle Museum is by one of Philadelphia's well-known contemporary artists. Brooker received a certificate from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) and his BFA and MFA from Tyler School of Fine Arts at Temple. He is now Basics Department Chair at Moore College of Art but has previously taught at the Universities of Virginia and North Carolina, The Cleveland Institute of the Arts, Tianjin College of the Arts in China, PAFA, and Parson School of Design in New York. Although his compositions are predominantly abstract, they are heavily inspired by the improvisational rhythms of jazz. The lines Brooker says are "like a series of melodies and chords." Like many of his images, this piece is a synthesis of vivid and contrasting color splashes set into shifting planes. These rectangular, overlapping patterns are punctuated with smaller dabs of color and wiry lines that vibrate in numerous directions on the surface. The whole composition bursts with exuberant gestures suggesting a sparkling celebration. Although this image appears to be very spontaneous or painted at random, Brooker gives much thought and preliminary study in developing his compositions.

2. Louis B. Sloan (b. 1932 —)

A Winter Day, 1983

Oil on board

A native of Philadelphia, Sloan attended classes at the Fleisher School of Art as early as 11 years of age. He was the first African-American to teach painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) where he became a much respected teacher (1962-1997). For much of this time he was also a Painting Conservator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Sloan devotes much of his retirement to painting landscapes which are infused with a poetic and ephemeral atmosphere but also most evocative of a particular season as in this winter scene in the pine barrens of New Jersey.

3. Robert J. Watson (b. 1946 —)

Misty Morning, North Carolina, 1994

Oil on panel

4. *Midnight Serenade, 1992*

Acrylic and watercolor on paper

Purchased with funds provided by the Art Angels

Watson is a visual artist, poet, actor, and former director of exhibitions at the African-American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia. A native of North Carolina, Watson attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Many of his murals can be seen in various institutions throughout the city Philadelphia which reflect his concern for social justice issues in an urban environment. (see his work in the Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia). His style is varied but more recently he has been creating collages of found objects in painted scenes as "parables of life" experiences. The two works here suggest a development from a traditional to a semi-abstract, but still personal, style.

5. Dox Thrash (1892/93 — 1965)

Girl Reading

Carbograph or Carborundum print

Given by Benjamin Bernstein

Thrash attended the Art Institute of Chicago and later studied printmaking with Earle Horter at the Graphic Sketch Club (now Fleisher School of Art) in Philadelphia. From 1935-1942 He was head of the Graphic Arts Division of the WPA in Philadelphia. This program was devoted to the development and production of Fine Art prints during the depression. His position gave him the opportunity to experiment with new graphic methods, especially to develop the *carbograph* or *carborundum* method as seen in this print. The crystals of carborundum pit the copper plate allowing for subtle or dramatic gradations of light and dark areas to define the forms. Thrash was also an active member of the Pyramid Club in Philadelphia, an African-American cultural center, where he served on many juries and committees.

6. Ellen Powell Tiburino (1937 — 1992)

Woman in Flowing Dress

Lithograph

Lent by Ragan and Regina Henry

Tiburino is perhaps Philadelphia's most recognized African-American female artist. Her talent in drawing provided her with a scholarship to the PAFA (1956-1961) where she later won the prestigious Cresson Traveling Scholarship to Europe. As seen in these two exhibited pieces she works in a figurative tradition but with a quivering energetic line that catches the character of the sitters—predominantly black women. Both

her paintings and drawings involve social commentary on the African-American experience. An Ellen Powell Tiburino Memorial Museum of Contemporary American Art is located in Powelton Village, West Philadelphia, where Tiburino lived and worked with her artistic family — a husband, three sons, and a daughter.

7. **John T. Harris (1908 — 1983)**
Checker Player At Marian Anderson Playground, 1950
Carbon pencil drawing
8. *Boy at Work in Recreation Center, 1941*
Pen and ink on paper

Harris graduated from Central High School, Philadelphia College of Art and Temple University. For most of his career he was an Associate Professor of Art at Cheyney State College (now University). A small exhibition of his drawings and watercolors was held in the La Salle Art Museum in 1981. Harris was perhaps best noted for his delicate rendition of portrait heads often with very poignant expressions of the sitters. This drawing of a man playing chess was sketched in a playground at 17th and Fitzwater Streets in South Philadelphia.

9. **Ellen Powell Tiburino (b.—1922)**
Woman Holding Flowers
Graphite on paper
Lent by Ragan and Regina Henry
10. **Paul F. Keene, Jr. (b. 1920 —)**
The Sorceress
Oil on canvas
11. *Haitian Voodoo Spirits, 1953*
Oil on panel
Given by Benjamin D. Bernstein

Keene, a graduate of Central High School, received his BFA and MFA from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. He was a teacher of painting and drawing for many years at Philadelphia College of Art (now University of the Arts) and Bucks County Community College. During his two year stay in Haiti in the 1950's he became absorbed with the voodoo religion and other aspects of Haitian culture. This experience later influenced his art as seen in this triptych with its colorful but complex suggestions of voodoo ritual: spirits, symbols and sacrificial offerings. In 2003 this ancient religion was officially recognized by the Haitian government after many years of ridicule and persecution. Keene has had many solo exhibitions both here and abroad, and his works are in the collections of many prominent museums.

Artists from Southwest Community Enrichment Center

Numbers 12 — 16 were created over the last several decades by art students of the Southwest Community Enrichment Center in West Philadelphia. Under the dedicated tutelage of artist, Sister Helen David Brancato (recently retired), hundreds of pupils ranging in age from 8 to 85 were inspired to "give voice to their hopes and dreams." Though her students had little or no prior art instruction, Sister Helen, with her abundant perseverance and encouragement soon gave her pupils the confidence and inspiration to create compelling and original images in a wide range of media and styles. Their art has been exhibited in local institutions including the La Salle University Art Museum in 1992.

12. **Tina Epps (b. 1983 —)**
Untitled, 1995
Tissue Collage
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Angels
13. **Ida May Sydnor (1921 — 2000)**
Untitled, 1991
Styrofoam prints
14. **Doris Turner (b. 1940 —)**
Untitled, 1991
Monoprint
15. **Angelica Harrison (b. 1989 —)**
Still Life with Apples and Basket, 1997
Pastel
Purchased with funds provided by the Art Angels
16. **Jeffrey Casey (b. 1979 —)**
The Cross, 1991
Craft paper collage

- 17. John F. Dowell (b. 1941 —)**
Les Termes, 1984
Color lithograph
Given by Rachel Bok Goldman

Dowell is a graduate of Tyler School of Art at Temple University where he is now Chair of the Printmaking Department. He has had many solo exhibitions both here and abroad, is represented in the collections of major museums, and is the recipient of numerous grants and prestigious awards. This abstract image and those in similar prints of the 1960's and 70's reflect Dowell's search to find "visual equivalents" for poetry and music, particularly modern jazz. He thinks of his images, as seen here, as notes on a musical score. Dowell, also a musician, has interpreted these abstractions in piano performances with other musicians.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

AFRICAN TRIBAL ART

While most of us may be familiar with the symbolic and spiritually directed images of Early Christian and Medieval art, we may need to be reminded that African tribal art was dominated by a similar mode of expression since before the time of Christ. Because tribal art is often labeled “primitive” we sometimes misinterpret its sculpture as crude and naive, rather than simply as “traditional”. Research over the past several decades has shown that African tribal sculptors were skilled and trained craftsmen, producing an art which is highly sophisticated and working in a style which represents a delicate aesthetic choice evolved over thousands of years.

From the Renaissance until the end of the nineteenth century, visual art of the West was essentially perceptual and objective, based for the most part on what the artist saw in the natural world around him and accurately, realistically depicted. On the other hand, tribal art throughout the ages, whether from Africa, South and North America, or the South Pacific, has been conceptual and subjective, based on what the artist feels and thinks—his fears, desires, ideas and beliefs. More specifically, as most African tribes have no written language, their intuitive art along with their oral tradition was the chief means through which they expressed and supported, from generation to generation, the spiritual values needed to sustain their communities. Their art, thus, is essentially functional — the decorative or “art for art’s sake” purpose emphasized in Western art is of secondary importance.

Much of traditional African sculpture which makes up this exhibition was produced in Sub-Saharan West and Central Africa, areas dominated by the Negro and Bantu speaking tribes living in agricultural communities. These areas were also surrounded by tropical rain forests, which provided an abundant source of wood for the sculptors. Unfortunately, due to adverse weather conditions and prevalent wood-eating insects, few objects have survived for more than a century. Thus, most of the pieces in this exhibition probably date from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century.

Although African tribes shared many beliefs and practices, distinct differences characterize their art. Isolated from other tribes or outside influences, traditional African art, unlike Western art, is not intertribal, certainly not international. Though the artists in this exhibition remain anonymous, the work of individual African carvers is beginning to be discerned as research develops.

The ancestor, cult and fetish figures, reliquaries and masks of African sculpture were produced to ward off evil and to invoke or honor the spirit and power of a particular deity or ancestor. These symbolic objects were used in ritual village ceremonies as the particular need arose and reflected the pantheon of gods belonging to the various cults and societies of each tribe. Other crafted objects with symbolic designs were made as daily accessories: gold weights made of brass, ladles, pottery, musical instruments, stools, and textiles.

African wood masks are considered by many scholars to be the most varied and intensely expressive form in the African arts. They were worn by trained performers dancing in ritual initiation, political investiture, funeral and seasonal rites. These rites were often concerned with the goal of increasing the fertility and life force of the tribe, its animals or crops. Although believing in one Creator, African tribes practiced "animism" whereby every natural object is endowed with a spiritual force and energy. To invoke these forces, as well as those of various deities and ancestors, African carvers were at liberty to simplify and abstract the animal or human facial features of the mask to heighten its expression. And here it should be recalled the strong influence that tribal art has exerted on Western modern art. Rather than any particular content, it is the expressive potential and unified structure in African sculpture — its bold patterns, simplified geometric shapes, vibrant rhythms and subjective colors — which strongly inspired the Post-Impressionists, Fauvists, Expressionists, and especially the Cubists. The Picasso print on exhibition in the 20th century gallery suggests this influence.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the vitality and full expression of African tribal art can never be completely realized when seen out of its own environment or without adequate knowledge of the religious values and traditions that are the basis for its creation. This is an invaluable introduction and permanent window into the mystery, magic and rich complexity of African tribal society. It is a strong beginning and one which we hope will encourage the student to seek further knowledge of our African-American heritage in the years ahead.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

HALL CASES

Unless otherwise mentioned, all of the objects are the bequest of America's first collector of African tribal art, Margaret Webster Plass. When known, the tribe and African country are listed.

CASE I

1. Wood Mask
Igbo, Nigeria
2. Wood Whistle
Possibly Pende, Zaire
3. Wood Ladle
Guro, Ivory Coast

CASE II

4. Wood Fertility Doll
Given by Benjamin Bernstein

Worn in the waistband of women and girls to insure fertility and beautiful children.

5. Wood Mask
6. Wood Fertility Doll
7. Wood Ladle
Guro, Ivory Coast

CASE III

8. Wood Mask
Pende, Zaire
9. Wood Ancestor Figure
Given by Benjamin D. Bernstein
10. Wood Mask
Ogoni, Nigeria
11. Bone Horn
Congo, Angola

CASE IV

12. Wood Fertility Doll
Ashanti, Ghana
13. Wood Mask
Yoruba, Nigeria
14. Brass Goldweights
Ashanti, Ghana
Given by Benjamin D. Bernstein

Goldweights, sculpted and cast by male artists, were used as counterweights to measure gold in an aggressive trading economy in Ghana and Ivory Coast. Their designs, whether geometric and abstract, or in shapes of animals, fish, birds, insects, plants, or tools, offer us insight into everyday village life as well as allusions to wit, proverbial wisdom and ethical standards of the tribal community.

15. Bone Horn
Congo, Angola

The African-American Seen 20th Century Hallway

The depiction of black subjects frequently involves dealing with some of the most painful questions of American history: slavery, poverty, and racial discrimination. This small installation of works from the La Salle University Art Museum focuses on some of these issues, but it also offers a redeeming view of people who have helped to make America a better place. These includes powerful images of significant political figures like Martin Luther King and Frederick Douglass, who helped to fight segregation, as well as uplifting and empowering images of friends, family and community.

- 1. Romare Bearden (1911-1988), African-American**
The Piano Lesson
Color lithograph, AP, ed. 5/10

Inspired by the subjects and by the bright, flat colors of two paintings by Henri Matisse –the *Piano Lesson* (1916) and the *Music Lesson* (1916) – Bearden's lithograph represents two African-American women at a piano inside a brilliantly colored interior. By choosing to situate his proudly black subjects in a space that evokes European interiors and in the manner of one of the great masters of European Modernism, the artist questions the cultural stereotypes that guide our appreciation of twentieth-century art.

2. Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), African-American

Sunday Promenade

Linocut on chine collé

Gift of Milton A. Washington and Nancy Duckery Washington

In the Depression years, the art movement known as Social Realism helped to shed light on a number of societal ills. In this print, Woodruff illuminates the poverty of African-Americans living in the Atlanta area. As in other prints from the series, the artist focuses on the inhabitants' depressed financial conditions and their decrepit homes. Despite these hardships, however, the figures are dressed in their Sunday finery, in defiance, it seems, of the squalor that surrounds them. Couples promenade the street in a manner more befitting the Champs d'Elysées than the shabby road of a Southern ghetto.

3. Julius Bloch (1888-1966), American

Shoe Shine Boy

Watercolor on paper

Gift of Benjamin D. Bernstein

Throughout his career, Julius Bloch was fascinated with the experience of African-Americans and based many of his works on his observations of black life. The shoeblack or shoeshine boy was a popular subject in art from the 19th century on, and we find references to him not only in high art, but also in popular music and cartoons. Yet, whereas the figure polishing shoes in a number of well-known paintings by nineteenth-century paintings is probably only nine or ten years old, in Bloch's drawing, the "boy" is a full-grown man. During the depression, millions were unemployed and turned to the street for employment. Shoeshine "boys" abounded on city sidewalks, ranging in age from teenagers who should have been in school to men past retirement age. Bloch's drawing reflects the Socialist Realist focus of prints produced as part of the WPA. What is interesting, here, however, is that the image does not appear to

denigrate black men by having them serve white men. Here, instead, the group is entirely composed of African-Americans, who use the occasion for some conversation as they are having a shoe shine.

4. Marion Greenwood (1909-1970), American
Gossip among Friends
Lithograph
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jay Stiefel

Marion Greenwood was a gifted artist at a young age. At fifteen years, she decided to leave high school and to study printmaking and painting at the Art Students League with John Sloan and George Bridgeman. She spent some time in Paris, but lived for many years in Mexico, where she worked on many murals, leading the important muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros to observe: "She could have been the queen of Mexico." After the Second World War, Greenwood joined the Associated American Artists (AAA), which was founded in the 1930s to produce and market fine art prints nationwide. This print was probably commissioned by the AAA, and reflects the artist's interest in Social Realist and African-American subjects. The scene shows three young women clustered together on a bench, with a fourth seen from the rear seated on the floor. The languid and intimate mood of the image suggests the private nature of their exchange.

5. Julius Bloch (1888-1966), American
Tired Travelers, 1927
Oil on canvas
Gift of the estate of the artist

In this painting, inspired by the French realist artist Henri Daumier's treatment of the so-called Third-class Carriage, Bloch focuses on travelers on a train. Surrounded by other weary workers, the African American closes his eyes and rests his head on his shoulder. Like his fellow traveling companions, the figure appears serene, reflecting Bloch's fascination with representing the tired workman relaxed and at peace.

6. Walter Williams (1920-1998), African-American

Boy with Caged Bird

Woodcut in three colors

Walter Williams studied art at the Brooklyn Museum's school, and later received a fellowship that allowed him to study in Mexico. After four years living and working there, he moved to Denmark where he believed he could live free from racial prejudice. Though apparently an image of childish games, the print of young black boy holding a caged bird is filled with foreboding. The imprisonment of the bird may in fact allude to the "captive" condition of the African-American in twentieth-century society

7. Walter Williams (1920-1998), African-American

***Girl with Butterflies*, 1964**

Woodcut in five colors

Williams' work in Copenhagen focused on a dreamlike, idyllic world, where black children reach for butterflies and flowers. There is nonetheless a darker side to his art. About the work exhibited here, the artist has said: "Its meaning for me is no more than of a little girl enchanted by the beauty of nature, and surrounded by it. The only beauty and color in her life, maybe."

8. Mina Casey (b. 1958), African-American

Portrait of Two Men, 1991

Acrylic on paper

9. Jeffrey Casey (b. 1979), African-American

Old Man and Candle, 1991

Acrylic on paper

Mina and Jeffrey Casey are both students, who took classes at the *Southwest Community Enrichment Center* under the direction of Sister Helen David Brancato. Neither Mina nor Jeffrey was formally trained as an artist, and they thus belong to a category that has now become known as "outsider art." Guided by their teacher, both came to understand the process of making art as a means to self-expression and self-realization. These images of African Americans, both old and young, celebrate the community in which the artists live.

10. Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975), American

Gateside Conversation, 1946

Lithograph

Gift of Mrs. Richard Crampton

Though slavery was abolished in the nineteenth-century, African-Americans in the South continued to suffer great economic hardship in the first half of the twentieth century. Limited to small plots of land, confined to farming with primitive hand tools, blacks were stuck in a cycle of endless debt to shopkeepers and landlords. This state of subservience is suggested in this fine lithograph by Benton, which shows a black laborer, back bent, leaning forward to speak to two white women in a buggy. The demeanor and elevated position of the women in the carriage bespeaks a haughty arrogance and lack of feeling for the plight of the worker in the field.

11. Ben Shahn (1898-1969), American

Martin Luther King, 1966

Wood engraving

In 1965, Shahn, who throughout his career fought for liberal political causes, was commissioned by *Time* magazine to create a portrait of Martin Luther King. The drawing he made of King appeared in the March 19 issue and was so popular that, with the help of his close friend the printmaker, Stefan Martin, he made a wood-engraved version of it. About the image Shahn claimed: "This is King today. He isn't as placid as a year ago. I admire the man immensely. He moved more people by his oratory than anyone else I can think of."

12. Julius Bloch (1888-1966), American

Bobby Fields, 1948

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Estate of Julius Bloch

From 1947-1962, Bloch taught portraiture at the Pennsylvania Academy. This portrait of Bobby Fields belongs to a number of portraits of African Americans he made in these years, including a portrait of the artist Horace Pippin, who had recently risen to fame. This painting is unusual for being painted in a traditional academic realist style, rather than modernist one. The author of an article in the *Negro History Bulletin*, Alain Locke of Howard University observed in 1940: "Julius Bloch is widely recognized for his psychological character studies of the Negro."

13. Charles Wells (b. 1935), American

Frederick Douglass

Mixed intaglio

Gift of Dennis and Judy O' Brien

Frederick Douglass was one of the foremost leaders of the abolitionist movement, which fought to end slavery within the United States in the decades prior to the Civil War. During this period of American history, Douglass provided a powerful voice for human rights and is still revered today for his contributions against racial injustice. Wells records the intensity of this character with his piercing gaze and bristly hair and beard. The print is one of many portraits Wells made in memory of important leaders, thinkers, and artists, including figures like Ghandi, Sir Isaac Newton and Rembrandt.

14. Robert F. McGovern (b. 1933), American

African Profile # 2

Woodcut

15. Robert F. McGovern (b. 1933), American

African Profile # 3

Woodcut

The artist, Robert McGovern, began his career as an artist. Unlike many of his subjects, which are religious in nature, these woodcuts are inspired by African art, especially African masks. McGovern has a sincere appreciation for the medium in which he works. He has been quoted as saying: "The forms gain much life from their own material substance. There is after all a kind of natural law of the materials." In these images he uses the grain of the wood to enhance the bold, primal feel of his subjects.

16. Louise Halpin (b.1947), American

***Jarret*, 1986**

Color monotype

Halpin frequently works in monotype, which involves working directly with brush and paint on a plate that is then run through a printing press, creating a unique print impression. The artist's expressive use of line is used here to accentuate the subject's mop of "nappy" hair and blossoming lips. The work was inspired by a trip the artist made to Jamaica.

Madeleine Viljoen

Curator